

M. Conti: *The Life and Works of Potamius of Lisbon*. (Instrumenta Patristica 32) Pp. xviii + 190. Turnhout: Brepols, 1998, pbk. ISBN: 2-503-50688-7.

Potamius of Lisbon is hardly one of the more celebrated churchmen of the fourth century AD. His life is shrouded in obscurity: we do not know when he was born, when he became bishop, or when he died. He emerges into the light of history in the mid-350s when, during the western residence of the ‘Arian’ emperor Constantius II, many bishops were called upon to adhere to the emperor’s preferred version of Christian orthodoxy — a version that would later be denounced as heresy after the triumph of Nicene Christology at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Potamius’ actions during this period are instructive. Whereas many of his more famous contemporaries — such as Hilary of Poitiers and Eusebius of Vercelli — refused to submit to Constantius’ demands and were forced into exile, Potamius chose instead to cooperate with the emperor and his religious associates. He participated in the Council of Sirmium of 357, apparently helping with the drafting of its statement of faith. This represents the highpoint of the ‘pro-Arian’ phase of Potamius’ career. By the time of the Council of Ariminum two years later, however, Potamius seems to have revised his opinions: it may have been at this time that he wrote a letter full of anti-Arian polemic to the champion of Nicene theology in the East, Athanasius of Alexandria. Thereafter he disappears from view. Potamius’ obscurity has not been helped by the tendency of earlier generations of scholars (building on the misapprehensions of medieval copyists) to attribute his works to other people. The *De Lazaro* was thought by some to be by John Chrysostom. It and Potamius’ *De martyrio Isaiiae prophetae* were also ascribed to Zeno of Verona, since they survived among

manuscripts of his works. Meanwhile the *Epistula de Substantia Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti* was ascribed to Jerome.

Marco Conti's short monograph is a preliminary study to his edition of the works of Potamius that has since appeared in the *Corpus Christianorum* series (volume 69A, with J. N. Hillgarth's edition of the *Altercatio ecclesiae et synagogae* [Turnhout, 1999]). He discusses Potamius' career (5-28) and writings (29-44). There are commentaries on the four works mentioned above that are attributed to Potamius by C. (45-132), as well as the fragment of a letter by Potamius quoted in Phoebadius of Agen's *Contra Arianos* 5.2 (133-4). Finally, C. provides Latin texts of Potamius' works with English translations (136-77). The work is completed by indices of citations and names; there is a bibliography at the beginning of the book. C.'s presentation of his material is straightforward and comprehensive. He sets out all the *testimonia* for Potamius' career and discusses them in turn (11-21). Similarly, his discussion of Potamius' doctrinal opinions sets out at length the differing opinions of various scholars (22-6). C.'s own views are not often stated explicitly, but his remarks at p. 26 about Manlio Simonetti's 'correct methodology' and 'scientific basis' and Antonio Montes Moreira's 'definitive proof' make it clear enough where C.'s sympathies lie. (For what it is worth, both Simonetti and Montes Moreira are thanked fulsomely in the acknowledgements.)

The book is marred in places by curious English syntax, misprints, and wayward punctuation. Nevertheless, C.'s commentaries on Potamius' various works are very useful indeed: literary and scriptural parallels are comprehensively marshalled and Potamius' stylistic devices are analysed. The texts printed here are taken over from older editions and, apart from correcting previous editors' misprints, lack a thorough critical

apparatus: they must now be supplanted by C.'s *Corpus Christianorum* edition. The translations do not always read easily. At times they are slavishly literal and clunky. I am not sure that Potamius' '*per ambiguas curas hinc inde in concavo vertiginis sinu pronis fluctibus torqueor*' (*De Lazaro*, lines 2-3) is necessarily made any clearer by being rendered as 'amid uncertain anxieties I am whirled this way and that by plunging waves in a hollow vertiginous cavity' (142). To be sure, C. is seeking to render into English the complex metaphors and allusions that fill Potamius' writings (cf. 58). Indeed, Potamius is a difficult writer to interpret. As C. points out repeated in his commentary, Potamius blends stylistic elements drawn from poetry, philosophy, and Scripture. Furthermore, the polemical letter to Athanasius and the works on Lazarus and the martyrdom of Isaiah show that he was also given to the most violent and gruesome imagery. Plainly, then, Potamius is not a writer for the faint of heart. So we should be grateful to C. for presenting us with this handy guide to one of the more vigorous and bizarre voices of fourth-century western Christianity.